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# Fix DCYF's structural problems first

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**A**SSERTING THAT the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) is "demolished," Jamea O. Alston, Rhode Island's child advocate, has sued the state on behalf of the 3,000-plus children in its custody. According to Alston, caseworkers have too many files; too many children reside in group facilities; DCYF overrelies on "night-to-night" placements and even places some children back with abusive parents. In other words, Rhode Island's most vulnerable children are being victimized twice: once by their families, and once by the state.

Alston made the same case in "Protect the Children, Protect the Future," her 2006 annual report, in which she mentioned litigation as an option but did not recommend it at the time. In retrospect, perhaps she was foreshadowing the consequences if DCYF and other parts of state government didn't follow the recommendations she had outlined. In that light, her jump from speculation to litigation is in response to DCYF's new budget, reduced from \$290 million for the just-ended fiscal year to \$233 million for fiscal 2008. It's also true that full-time equivalent (FTE) positions have decreased from 876 in fiscal 2001 to 805 in fiscal 2008.

What Alston sees is an agency with fewer workers and less money. However, that takes the long view for employees, but the short view for budget. The fiscal 2008 budget is actually about 20 percent higher than in 2001, when it was \$195 million, and the 805 FTEs for which the legislature's latest budget calls is up from 790 in 2007.

Alston's 2006 report also contains a case study of the hurdles facing reform.

Looking into several complaints against some Juvenile Program Workers (JPWs) at the Rhode Island Training School (RITS), she suggested that "a shortage of social workers, JPWs and unit managers was a significant stressor which may have contributed to the number of abuse and neglect allegations." She had met with staff at the RITS as well as Child Protective Services and Council 94, Local 314 (AFSME) "to work out investigative protocols which protect the child's and worker's respective rights without compromising the integrity of the investigative process." Yet, "each time it appeared that there was an agreement on the protocols, Council 94 would subsequently object to the [Office of the Child Advocate's] participation in the investigation." Not enough workers, not enough funding, and union roadblocks to reform.

Observing from the outside, taxpayers may not be surprised to learn that, despite the job reductions, the amount of the DCYF budget devoted to salaries has increased. In 2001, its total salaries amounted to \$41.7 million, an average annual salary of \$47,500. The fiscal 2008 number is \$49.7 million, or \$61,300 per person. Overall, average salaries at DCYF have increased 30 percent per FTE since 2001. Meanwhile, the inflation rate was about 20 percent (according to InflationData.com).

Of course, total payroll costs for state government (i.e., the taxpayers) include benefits, too, and those numbers are startling. Total costs have increased nearly 40 percent since fiscal 2001, going from \$55.6 million (\$63,400 per FTE) to \$76.7 million (\$94,600 per FTE). Moreover, the amount of the

budget going toward payroll compensation has increased from 29.3 percent in fiscal 2001 to 32.9 percent in fiscal 2008. Thus, since fiscal 2001 the percentage set aside for payroll has increased 3.6 percent, while the total number of DCYF workers has declined by 7.5 percent. That means that payroll costs per worker have increased by nearly 50 percent since fiscal 2001.

The problems occurring at DCYF are rooted in the same inefficiencies that plague the entire state government. Until overly generous increases in salaries and benefit packages regardless of individual performance, overprotective unions stonewalling against reform, and administrative bloat — to mention three practices — are changed, we will continue to shortchange both the end-users and the funders of government services.

If we take Ms. Alston at her word, a 38 percent increase in payroll costs since fiscal 2001 has done little to mitigate the problems at DCYF. Would employees — or their unions — be willing to scale back on their salary and benefit demands to enable more people to be hired to help them with the caseloads? With a finite amount of money to go around, until they do so, we will continue to employ fewer of them for more money, and no matter the heroics of individual DCYF workers, more kids will slip through the cracks.

Unless it finally begins sinning in that Rhode Island needs to fix its structural problems to survive, Alston's 3,000 are sure to be only early faces in the parade of abuse.

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